

County and WSSC clash

By Ryan Gallagher
Staff Writer

With mounting concerns over the commissioners of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission's unwillingness to play ball with the Montgomery and Prince George's County Council's, Montgomery County council members voted down WSSC's FY07 capital and operating budget last Thursday.

Council members said the vote is a formal declaration of the council's shared frustrations toward WSSC, specifically concerning Prince George's appointed WSSC commissioners. The council voted 6-3 against the budget.

WSSC is a bi-county organization run by two sets of three commissioners. One set is appointed by the Montgomery County executive while the other set is appointed by the Prince George's County executive. Prince George's appointed commissioners are Joyce Starks, Juanita D. Miller, and Prem P. Agarwal.

The council's indignation toward the Prince George's commissioners stems from two issues: their concern that WSSC is mistreating their employees and that they are purposefully delaying the transfer of a piece of land that Montgomery county officials have been trying to acquire from Prince George's County for nearly two years. Council members claim Prince George's

commissioners are delaying the transfer strictly for political gain.

Site II is a 115-acre former composting facility located in Montgomery county near Route 29. The site is now unused, but the Montgomery County Council has plans to use the space for the East County Center for Science and Technology, which is estimated to create more than 2,000 jobs. But council members say Prince George's commissioners are intentionally delaying the sale so they can gain more control of WSSC's contracting.

"Site two is being held hostage to a desire on the part of the Prince George's commissioners to have control over the minority business office," said Councilman Steve Silverman (D-At Large). "That's politics at it's worst."

The other issue of employee treatment was brought to the council's attention after Andrew Brunhart, WSSC's general manager, fired 70 information technology employees in an attempt to modernize their IT department. Council members called it a unilateral decision that was "unprecedented and unfortunate."

Council member Marilyn Prissner (D-Dist. 4) said she thinks the council should evaluate whether or not WSSC should continue to operate as a bi-county organization.

"Given the fact that I can exercise a protest vote... it allows me to say publicly I don't like what's going on," said Prissner. "I've reached a

point of utter frustration with the Prince George's commissioners and therefore WSSC."

Despite councilmembers' verbal outrage against WSSC commissioners, the vote does not carry any substantial consequences to the organization because disagreements have already surfaced regarding WSSC's budget during the bi-county council meeting May 11. The councils did not concur on any of the proposed WSSC budget changes, so according to state law, WSSC's originally proposed budget, minus any added amendments, will take effect. The council's vote Thursday would have done the same.

Councilman Howard Denis (R-Dist. 1) said these ongoing clashes keep both counties from moving forward.

"The image of log rolling is apt in this instance. We can't do anything without Prince Georges, they can't do anything without us. You've got to get along," said Denis, who voted in favor of WSSC's budget. "To come to an up or down vote on the budget, I just felt I had to vote for the budget."

Because two amendments were eliminated from WSSC's budget, the Anacostia storage facility, which cost \$55,000 in FY07 and a study, estimated to cost the \$863,000 in FY07 will be put on hold. But legislative analysts say there are measures that can be taken to fund the septage study for FY07.

The WSSC could not be reached by press time.